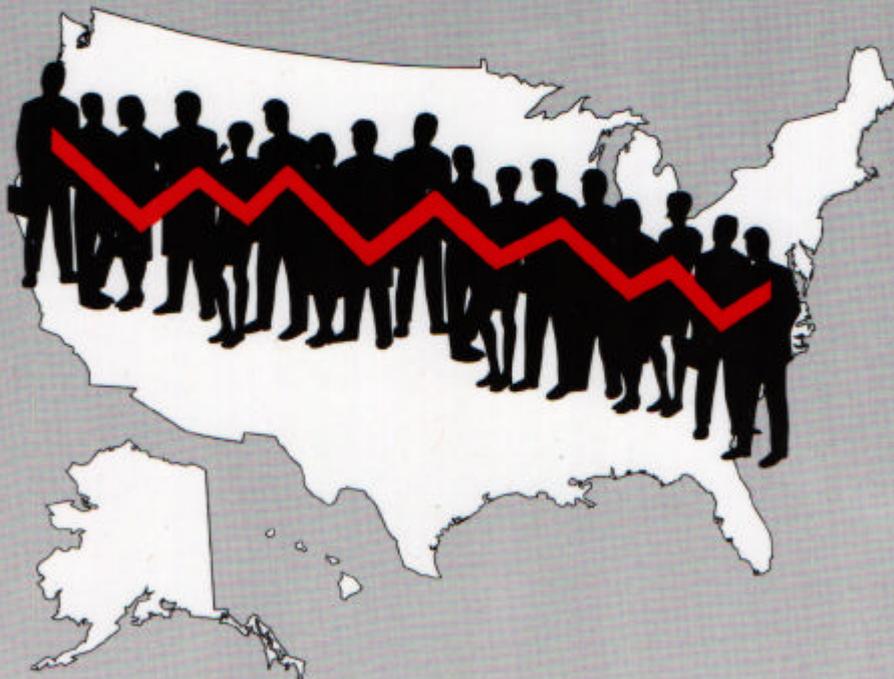


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NIOSH

Fatal Injuries to Workers in the United States, 1980-1989: A Decade of Surveillance



National Profile



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Public Health Service

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August 1993



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FOREWORD

We dedicate this report to the faces behind the numbers...to the individuals who have lost their lives at work and to the families and friends left behind. If you see only the numbers in this book, you have missed the point. Each number, each death counted, represents a life, the life of an American worker, a life cut short while simply trying to earn a living.

Death on the job is a problem that affects us all. It is a mainstream public health problem that rarely receives mainstream public attention. We must recognize that every father, mother, every young man and young woman killed at work is a loss to our community and to our future as a nation. A child grows up without a parent, parents grow old without children, neighbors live on without a friend, and on and on.

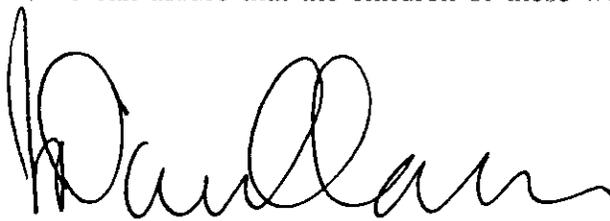
On average, 17 American workers die each day in this country; as a nation, we have come to accept this as a matter of course. Each day the stories of work-related fatalities are buried along with the victims. Incidents are reported as "horrible accidents" with no mention of prevention, no recognition of the work-relatedness, and no sense of outrage that they occurred. The most visible occupational fatalities in history occurred on January 28, 1986, as the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded in flames over Cape Canaveral. Six astronauts and a high-school teacher were killed...earning a living, doing their job. The nation was shocked and horrified.

On that same day, January 28, 1986, at least 16 other Americans lost their lives while doing the same thing—simply earning a living, doing their job. Where was the horror? Where was the outrage?

During the course of that day, a retail manager and a special investigator were shot to death, the manager of a manufacturing plant and the president of a drilling company died of burns from explosions, a lineman was electrocuted, two plasterers fell to their deaths from a scaffold, a driller died of asphyxiation after falling into an oil well, two loggers were killed falling from a rigging cable, another logger died of a skull fracture after being pinned by a log against his truck, a coal miner was crushed by falling rock, and two truckers, a farm laborer and a teacher died in separate motor vehicle crashes. These workers, ranging in age from 16 to 81 years old, all went to work that day and died as a result of it...simply trying to earn a living.

Why weren't we shocked? When the Challenger exploded, it was a totally unexpected occurrence. We, as a nation, became accustomed to men and women soaring smoothly through space and coming home safely. Astronauts are not supposed to die doing their job. Other workers are not supposed to die either.

While we can do nothing to bring back the dead, we can act vigorously to protect the living. Prevention calls for a focus on the *living*. As you look at the data in this book, remember each worker who died, and mourn his or her death. But remembering is not enough. We must take the knowledge presented here and act! In almost every instance reported, the fatal "accident" could have been readily prevented. The years of life lost were wasted. Working together *now*, we can assure that the children of these workers do not have to die...simply trying to earn a living.



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The success of the National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities (NTOF) surveillance system is due in large part to the help and cooperation of state vital records offices. We are grateful to the state vital registrars and their staffs for providing these valuable data.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Death from work-related injuries is a major public health problem. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health collects and automates death certificates from the 52 vital statistics reporting units in the 50 states, New York City, and the District of Columbia for workers 16 years of age or older who died as a result of a work-related injury. Analysis of occupational injury deaths by demographic, employment, and injury characteristics facilitates effective use of resources aimed at preventing injuries in the workplace. In looking at these data, it is important to note the distinction between rates and actual number of deaths. Rates depict the risk faced by workers, and numbers indicate the magnitude of the problem or the number of lives that would be saved if these injuries had been prevented.

- From 1980 through 1989, 63,589 workers died from injuries sustained while working; 62,289 (98%) were workers in the civilian labor force.
- For 1980 through 1989, the average annual occupational fatality rate for the U.S. civilian work force was 7.0 per 100,000 workers.
- The leading causes of occupational injury death in the United States were motor vehicle crashes (23%), machine-related incidents (14%), homicides (12%), falls (10%), electrocutions (7%), and being struck by falling objects (7%).
- Leading causes of death vary by gender; the leading cause of death for females was homicide (41%), while homicide accounted for 10% of the occupational injury deaths among males.
- 80% of those who died from occupational injury were White, 11% were Black, 6% were Hispanic, 2% were Asian and Pacific Islanders, less than 1% were American Indians/Alaska Natives, and 1% of the cases were of other or unknown race/ethnicity.
- Black workers had the highest fatality rate per 100,000 workers (6.5), followed by Whites (5.8) and workers of Other races (4.9).
- The age group with the largest number of occupational injury fatalities was the 25-29 year old age group (14%); followed by the 30-34 year old age group (13%), and the 20-24 year old age group (12%).
- Workers 65 years and older had the highest fatality rate of all age groups, with 14.6 deaths per 100,000 workers. Workers 65 years and older also had the highest rates of work-related injury death in every occupation division and in every industry division except mining.
- The fatality rate for males (9.8 per 100,000 workers) was 12 times higher than for females (0.8 per 100,000 workers).
- Civilian fatal occupational injuries decreased 23%; from 7,405 in 1980 to 5,714 in 1989.

- The average annual fatality rate per 100,000 civilian workers also decreased, from 8.9 in 1980 to 5.6 in 1989—a 37% decrease.
- The largest number of fatalities occurred in the construction (18%), transportation/communication/public utilities (18%), manufacturing (14%), and agriculture/forestry/fishing (12%) industry divisions.
- The mining industry had the highest average annual fatality rate per 100,000 workers (31.9); followed by construction (25.6), transportation/communication/public utilities (23.3), and agriculture/forestry/fishing (18.3).
- The occupation divisions with the largest number of fatalities were precision production/craft/repair (19%), transportation/material movers (19%), laborers (13%), and farmers foresters/fishers (12%).
- The occupation division of transportation/material movers had the highest average annual fatality rate per 100,000 workers (25.6); followed by farmers/foresters/fishers (21.3), laborers (17.2), and precision production/craft/repair occupations (9.3).
- The greatest number of fatal occupational injuries occurred in Texas (6,664), California (6,623), Florida (3,681), Illinois (2,853), and Pennsylvania (2,564).
- The states with the highest occupational injury fatality rates for the private sector were Alaska (34.8), Wyoming (29.0), Montana (20.9), Idaho (16.7), and West Virginia (15.7).

Surveillance data such as those gathered through the National Traumatic Occupational Fatalities system, allow the description of the nature and magnitude of the occupational injury problem in the U.S., the identification of potential risk factors, the generation of hypotheses for further research, and the setting of research and prevention priorities. These data provide the foundation for the next decade of research and prevention efforts aimed at reducing fatal injuries to workers in the U.S.

